



Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism

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"Tropics of Discourse" develops White's ideas on interpretation in history, on the relationship between history and the novel, and on history and historicism. Vico, Croce, Derrida, and Foucault are among the figures he assesses in this work, which also offers original interpretations of a number of literary themes, including the Wild Man and the Noble Savage. White's commentary ranges from a reappraisal of Enlightenment history to a reflective summary of the current state of literary criticism.

Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism Details

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Zacharygs says

Good selection of essay, first few are rather outstanding. I actually liked this better than the Content of the Form, and his writing is pretty exceptional. I also think he's clearer here on the fictional nature of all history.

Dan says

White analyzes the discourse of historiography—the language employed in the writing of history—calling attention to the generic narrative forms historians use, and how these latter are reflected in the figures of speech or “tropes” the historians deploy.

Gary Norris says

diatactic not dialectic

Alex says

Good stuff, and good for you.

Trevor Russell says

A tough read, but worth it (most of the time).

Aldon Rau says

I have gotten behind on my reading of late, having become occupied with various other pursuits—learning to crawl, stand up, and the like. I found this book to be an excellent starting place for getting back into more intellectual pursuits. The bright color of the cover and large typeface practically commands one to investigate further. The book is not too large to be manageable, and the emphasis on making explicit one's own circumstances as a participant in discourse (say, one's mother attempting to distract one from playing with the DVD player by handing one a book) is ideal for any individual who is just beginning to grasp the concept of being-in-the-world.

Miss says

I like Hayden White. I like the ideas he is proposing. I find him convincing. I know that he later gives alternatives to the old ways of historiography but in this collection of essays he is convincingly showing how history is still an art, that the distinction between literature and history is only a farce. No one can escape language and its laws. Language which is connected to our consciousness and our structuring of the world. It's a devastating point because it makes the idea of an objective science impossible. But instead of giving up, an honest consciousness about these facts can lead to a better historiography. There is freedom in the mind, there is freedom in language and in the end we use language, it doesn't use us.

Cristina says

In *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Hayden White discusses the problems and promises of history. Human nature has made us curious, cerebral beings. We thrive on questions perhaps even more than we thrive on answers, and it is namely the more problematic issues--culture, society, and history, among others--that intrigue and baffle us. And yet, our "discourse always tends to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them; or, what amounts to the same thing, the data always resist the coherency of the image which we are trying to fashion of them" (White 1). In other words, the "Big Picture" is often ungraspable, like sand sifting through our fingers. We must grapple with it throughout existence, pass this grappling down through generations just as we have inherited it, and attempt to make sense of our experiences as best we can. White's collection of essays attempt to deal with the tropical element ingrained in all discourse, "whether of the realistic or the more imaginative kind" (1-2). It is this element that White calls "inexpungeable from discourse in the human sciences, however realistic they may aspire to be" (2). He adds that tropic is "the shadow from which all realistic discourse tries to flee" (2).

And yet, this is a hopeless flight, "for tropic is the process by which all discourse constitutes the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively. How tropes function in the discourses of the human sciences," ultimately, is at the root of White's essays in this collection (2). White borrows the idea of tropes and their sundry uses from Harold Bloom, who suggests that a trope is the linguistic equivalent of a psychological mechanism of defense. White adds that troping is both "a movement from one notion of the way things are related to another notion, and a connection between things so that they can be expressed in a language that takes account of the possibility of their being expressed otherwise" (2). Troping is crucial to discourse, the latter being an "effort" to earn a "right of expression" (2). Thus, White says, we can agree with Bloom's contention that "all interpretation depends upon the antithetical relation between meanings and not the supposed relation between text and its meaning" (2).

White uses a "fourfold pattern" rooted in an archetypal structure, also based upon an overlapping of theories from which he draws. The structure requires that a narrative "I" of a discourse move from an original metaphoric characterization of an experience, through metonymic deconstructions of the elements of this experiential domain, and then on to synechdochic representations. In this third stage, the relationship between the presumed essence and its superficial attributes will be, White insists, revealed. The fourth step in the process is the arrival of a representation of "whatever contracts or oppositions can legitimately be discerned in the totalities identified in the third phase of discursive representation" (5). Giambattista Vico, G.W.F. Hegel, and Karl Marx hold similar views, suggesting that, in this final point, this "diataxis of discourse not only mirrored the processes of consciousness but in fact underlay and informed all efforts of human beings to endow their world with meaning" (5). Moreover, Freud's evaluation of the four processes

of the dreamwork overlap with White's four tropes of discourse. Hence, the pattern is set; the theorists are aligned (or where they are not, they at least offer an alternative and complimentary look at one another). The final result of *Tropics of Discourse* is an artful use of the tropes to indicate their function as the signs and stages in the evolution of human consciousness, and how this consciousness evaluates history.

Christy says

Should be read more than many of the late 20th century critics who are currently considered required reading for the literary scholar, IMO.

Joni says

would claim it a classic. just read it
